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Conservatism—An Invitation to the Great Tradition**

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Editorial Introduction to a Symposium on Roger Scruton's *Conservatism—An Invitation to the Great Tradition*

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Sir Roger Scruton, doubtlessly one of the most accomplished and productive thinkers of conservatism in the present age, has published a new book: *Conservatism—An Invitation to the Great Tradition*. What's special about this book? Why bother to read it, given that it isn't his first book on the subject? Well, first because all of his books he has written in previous years were highly instructive and pleasurable reads—why should it be different this time? Second, *An Invitation* is not only Scruton's most recent, but probably ripest and most impressive, articulation of his conservative creed. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Scruton's new book differs from his previous ones in terms of genre. Unlike *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980) or *How to be a Conservative* (2014), it isn't primarily a direct scholarly exposition of conservatism. Unlike *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* (2016), it isn't an indirect one either. Unlike *On Hunting* (1999) or the chapter 'Eating Your Friends' in *Arguments for Conservatism* (2006) the new book is not primarily a political intervention or a vindication of some morally disputed activity. Instead, with *An Invitation*, as the title suggests, Scruton takes up the challenge of handing down an intellectual tradition to infidels.

Handing down an intellectual tradition is a demanding task. It cannot be achieved by constructing a powerful argument or by means of persuasion alone. Ultimately, the success of the endeavor depends upon one's ability to familiarize readers with a comprehensive way of thinking, to equip them with the means to internalize it, and to motivate them to pass that way of thinking on to the next generation in turn.

To hand down the intellectual tradition of conservatism is a particularly demanding task because conservatism is a bittersweet sort of nectar. Whereas liberalism or socialism accept a sobering aftertaste to court their consumers upon the first sip, conservatism has a reconciling finish but starts off with an astringent sensation—just think of Burke's puzzling dictum that change is a necessary means to prevent

change in politics, or the maxim Hume considered false in fact but true in politics, namely, 'that every man must be supposed a knave.'

Probably no existing thinker knows better than Scruton about the unfavorable first impression conservatism may make even on curious natures, and that adherents to other intellectual traditions are likely to turn away brusquely already when hearing the term 'conservatism' unless followed by an immediate *revoco*. That's why Scruton, in this new book, narrates the (hi)story of conservatism as a concomitant feature of a much more popular creed, as a 'qualification of' or 'hesitation within' liberalism, as he puts it (pp. 23, 33). He points to conservative considerations in the work of thinkers typically considered liberal, such as Harrington, Locke, Montesquieu and Smith, in order to encourage 'well-meaning liberals to take a look at what those [the conservative] arguments really are' (p. 6).

This symposium assesses Scruton's literary technique and rhetorical strategy, but it also discusses the narrative of the conservative tradition on offer. For even though it is nominally addressed to liberals, *An Invitation* is bound to intercede in the dispute over authenticity among self-identified conservatives and scholars of conservatism. It provides an account of conservatism after all, and it does so by selecting and harmonizing certain thinkers and themes while marginalizing others. One shouldn't be surprised, accordingly, that praise goes hand in hand with friendly suggestions for modifications, skeptical questions and critical considerations.

Thus, the lead essay, by Eno Trimčev, reads *An Invitation* as Scruton's 'definite statement on the politics of our time.' Commending it for its willingness to proceed from what is already given in the here and now, Trimčev argues that the horizon of empirical conservatism should be enlarged by turning to its metaphysical roots—for this might be necessary to illumine the conservative core experience of order, the experience of what Scruton calls 'sacrality.' In a

similarly constructive vein, Kevin Mulligan proceeds from the assumption that political philosophies must be based on social philosophies, and—wondering whether Scruton’s thought since recently has taken an ‘axiological’ turn—explores Max Scheler’s philosophy as a promising source of inspiration for such a task.

David Corey recommends pushing the point of conservatism’s qualifying nature a little bit further to include also the Marxist and transhumanist calls for liberation from economic exploitation and biological necessity. Conservatism, Corey suggests, is most adequately grasped as a family of reactionary movements to political forces trying to pull entirely down some barrier to freedom. The next essay, by Noël O’Sullivan, tracks the development of Scruton’s conservative thought through his entire oeuvre, seeing in it an ‘intellectual level almost unrivalled by contemporary conservative thinkers.’ At the same time, he argues, Scruton’s conservatism has remained short on a plausible answer to the question of political legitimacy; its problem diagnosis, that the west is suffering from a moral, political and spiritual alienation is ultimately based on an immodest epistemology that doesn’t fit well with the conservative tradition; and that Scruton’s remedy, the re-enchantment of the west, has some problematic quasi-populist implications.

In addition to the historical and theoretical dimensions, Kieron O’Hara engages with the strategic ones of *An Invitation*. He fears that Scruton’s narrative of conservatism’s prehistory and philosophical birth might ultimately serve more to look after the ash than keeping the flame of conservatism alive. Singling out Islamism and political correctness as the main challenges of the 21st century, O’Hara argues, might not inspire the non-conservative addressees effectively enough. Efraim Podoksik’s essay focuses on Chapter 3, ‘Conservatism in Germany and France,’ discussing whether Scruton’s new book succeeds in walking the fine line between appealing to liberals and sketching out a conservatism that is distinct and cannot simply be incorporated into the liberal framework it is meant to qualify substantially.

Nicholas Capaldi attempts to understand, explain and transcend the semantic controversy between liberalism and conservatism along Hayekian and Oakeshottian terms in order to reaffirm and further elucidate why *An Invitation* is such an important book. He emphasizes, however, that Scruton’s account is firmly situated in the Anglo-American branch of the conservative tradition, and in this finding, is backed by Ron Dart and Nathan Cockram, who, in their respective essays, make a case for the continuing rele-

vance of more orthodox varieties of Toryism. Finally, Leslie Marsh, the managing editor of *Cosmos + Taxos*, raises some important questions about the pressing issue of toleration. While tolerating the intolerant cannot be an option for any political regime aiming at stability, it is controversial that rediscovering and defending our political *and religious* inheritance, as Scruton claims in his last chapter ‘Conservatism Now,’ could be a viable alternative.

The issue concludes with a reply by Sir Roger Scruton. Whether and to what extent *An Invitation* will succeed in transmitting the conservative tradition favored by Scruton to the present and following generations remains to be seen. But even those who are reluctant to accept this intellectual inheritance will have to admit that it cannot simply be ignored. It ought to be taken seriously in academic and public discourse. This symposium hopes to contribute to this process.